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*The Atlantic Community mistake on Ethiopia:
counter-productive statements and data-poor policy of
the EU and the USA on the Tigray conflict*

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Abstract

Global media discussion and policy responses to the armed conflict in Tigray Region, Ethiopia, that started on 3-4 November 2020 by the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) party-led Tigray Regional government, are marked by bias, incompleteness, lack of context understanding, credulity and an anti-federal government attitude. The conflict, provoked by an unannounced and treacherous nightly attack by TPLF forces on federal army troops stationed in Tigray to protect the Region, was the result of misplaced power-mongering by the TPLF, and its building up of tension with the federal Ethiopian government. The 3-4 November attack led to a major federal army response. Five days after the attack by TPLF, on 9 November 2021, over 800 Amharic-speaking civilian inhabitants of the town of Mai Kadra in Western Tigray were killed by TPLF-affiliated forces and militias in a gruesome manner – a classic case of 'ethnic cleansing'. Perpetrators mostly fled to Sudanese refugee camps. These two events - the 4 November attack and the 'ethnic cleansing' - were defining dramatic moments in the war. While the conflict unfolded, leading to defeat of the TPLF forces on 28 November 2020 with the taking over of the regional capital Mekele and the flight of the TPLF leadership, many leading Western media and news websites focused on the aftermath and the effects of the fighting in Tigray Region and its population, easily shifting sympathy towards the perceived 'underdog' (TPLF). This was followed by hastily written statements by foreign policy makers in EU, USA and UN circles, leading to an emerging policy narrative whereby essential details of the context, the nature of the adversaries, the reasons of the conflict were sidelined. These Atlantic community spokespersons shifted to 'blaming' the federal Ethiopian government and 'demanding' all kinds of measures from it. Notable was the international community clamouring for 'unlimited and full access' for humanitarian aid to 'prevent famine', and demand a halt to all hostilities. But meanwhile it did not deliver much aid itself and did as if making it conditional on the federal government following their orders. Part of the international media, several academic associates and researchers who saw access to their research sites blocked, and diverse TPLF associates in various international organizations continued to fuel the flames of this approach, next to the 'digital activism' and the production of fake news reports by pro-TPLF persons in Ethiopia and especially in the Tigrayan 'diaspora' in the West.

All this led to serious misperceptions and unfair bias on the part of the Atlantic countries and the UN *vis-à-vis* Ethiopia, which endangered integrity, balance, and a proper perspective on causes and consequences, as well as to policies that seemed akin to 'development aid blackmail' and sanctimonious lecturing of a fragile, low-income African developing country. In the exercise, the detailed press statements, reports and explanations by Ethiopian parties, including the government and reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, are routinely neglected or doubted. In contrast, the statements and international messages by TPLF remnants and advocates, marked by a high degree of unreliability, exaggeration and very often lacking truth content, are used uncritically. On the basis of a number of telling examples, this paper describes the above process, analyses the emerging Atlantic discourse and some of its mistakes and wrong assumptions. It thereby pleads for a more balanced, critical approach to the incomplete reporting and wilful misinformation from questionable sources so as to have the media and Atlantic policy makers develop a more responsible approach.

Résumé

La discussion médiatique mondiale et les réponses politiques au conflit armé dans la région du Tigray, en Éthiopie, qui fut initié le 3-4 novembre 2020 par le gouvernement régional du Tigray dirigé par le parti TPLF (Tigray Peoples Liberation Front), sont marquées par des préjugés, des incomplétudes, un manque de compréhension du contexte, la crédulité et une attitude contre le gouvernement fédéral. Le conflit, provoqué par une attaque nocturne inopinée et perfide par les forces tigréennes contre les troupes de l'armée fédérale stationnées au Tigré pour protéger la région, était le résultat d'une politique de la force mal jugée par le TPLF et sa montée des tensions avec le gouvernement fédéral éthiopien. L'attaque du 3-4 novembre a évoquée à une réponse directe de l'armée fédérale. Cinq jours après l'attaque du TPLF, plus de 800 habitants civils de langue amharique de la ville de Mai Kadra dans le Tigray occidental ont été tués, le 9 novembre 2021, par des forces et des milices affiliées au TPLF d'une manière horrible - un cas classique de «nettoyage ethnique», et les auteurs ont pour la plupart fui vers les camps de réfugiés soudanais. Ces deux événements - l'attaque du 4 novembre et ce «nettoyage ethnique» - étaient des moments dramatiques cruciales de la guerre. Alors que le conflit se déroulait, conduisant à la défaite des forces du TPLF le 28 novembre 2020 avec la prise de contrôle de la capitale régionale Meqele et la fuite des dirigeants du TPL, de nombreux médias et sites Internet occidentaux de premier plan se sont concentrés sur les conséquences et les effets des combats dans la région du Tigray et sa population, la sympathie se déplaçant facilement vers le «perdant» perçu (TPLF). Cela a été suivi par des déclarations écrites à la hâte par des décideurs politiques étrangers aux cercles de l'UE, des États-Unis et de l'ONU, menant à un récit politique émergent dans lequel les détails essentiels du contexte, de la nature des adversaires et des raisons du conflit ont été mis de côté. Ces portes-parole de la communauté atlantique sont passés à toujours «blâmer» le gouvernement fédéral éthiopien et à «exiger» toutes sortes de mesures de sa part. Il convient de noter que la communauté internationale toujours réclamait un «accès illimité et complet pour l'aide humanitaire» pour «prévenir la famine» et exigeait «l'arrêt de toutes les hostilités, mais entre-temps, elle n'a pas fourni beaucoup d'aide et semble la conditionner à ce que le gouvernement fédéral suive ses ordres. Une partie de la presse mondiale, plusieurs universitaires qui ont vu l'accès à leurs sites de recherche bloqué, et divers associés du TPLF dans diverses organisations internationales ont continué à alimenter les flammes de cette approche, à côté de «l'activisme digitale» et de la production de «fake news» et rapports douteux de personnes pro-TPLF en Éthiopie et en particulier dans la «diaspora» tigréenne en Occident. Tout cela a conduit à de graves perceptions erronées et à des préjugés injustes de la part des pays atlantiques et de l'ONU vis-à-vis de l'Éthiopie qui ont mis en danger l'intégrité, l'équilibre et une bonne perspective des causes et des conséquences, ainsi qu'à des politiques qui semblent s'apparenter à une approche sur base de «development aid blackmail» et des discours moralisateurs envers un pays africain pauvre et en développement fragile. Dans l'exercice, les déclarations de presse détaillées et les explications de la part de l'Éthiopie, y compris le gouvernement et le Premier Ministre réformiste Abiy Ahmed, sont régulièrement négligés ou mis en doute. En revanche, les déclarations et les messages internationaux des défenseurs du TPLF, marqués par un degré élevé de manque de fiabilité, d'exagération et souvent dépourvus de contenu véridique, sont utilisés sans critique. Sur la base d'un certain nombre d'exemples révélateurs, cet article décrit le processus ci-dessus et analyse le discours atlantique émergent et certaines de ses erreurs et hypothèses erronées. Il plaide ainsi pour une approche plus équilibrée et critique du reportage incomplet et de la désinformation afin que les médias et la politique atlantique développent une politique plus responsable.

The Atlantic Community mistake on Ethiopia: counter-productive statements and data-poor policies of the EU and the USA on the Tigray conflict

1. The Tigray conflict and the struggle for 'truth'

The struggle for truthful and responsible accounts on the dramatic 2020-2021 Tigray Region conflict (northern Ethiopia) continues, and it is no mean effort to get things clear into perspective. Having done decades of research in Ethiopia, I never thought I would have to write this kind of essay addressing misinformation and data-poor statements made in the global arena. But these days we see some surprising scenes in the international fora and media on the issue. I limit myself here to the recent responses of the Atlantic partners, EU and USA (with the U.K. largely following the USA line), who are presumed major long-term political and 'development partners' of Ethiopia but who quickly seem to take one side – that of the war mongerer. Some additional remarks will be made on the UN's approach. The Tigray conflict was tragic and bloody but inevitable after the 3 November 2020 late night attack by the Tigray Region's insurgent Tigray Peoples Liberation Front leadership (<https://www.africanews.com/2020/11/27/the-midnight-attack-on-an-army-camp-that-plunged-ethiopia-into-war/>) on the federal armed forces' Northern Command bases (see below), where more than half of Ethiopia's total military hardware and army stocks were located.

The battle on 'the truth' of 'what happened' and 'who was to blame' started immediately, with somewhat surprisingly the global media and Tigray regime supporters casting the TPLF largely in the role of 'underdog' and 'victim'. Such a narrative move is not new in the media, that look at day-to-day 'events' and not at the wider context and prehistory of conflicts. But that international powers like the EU and the USA follow suit in their own responses and base *policy* on such narrative is more remarkable. These international powers often seem not to do their homework and (re)produce unchecked information on the conflict, on the nature of the TPLF leadership and produce accusatory stories only on the federal government. Abuses were indeed committed on several sides, but incomparably more so on the side of the TPLF forces than on that of federal army or Eritrean forces (who participated but according to the Ethiopian government 'came uninvited' into Tigray, as Ethiopian General Belay Seyoum noted (<https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-we-dont-want-it-north-command-chief-on-eritrean-army-in-tigray-says-army-didnt-let-alien-forces-in-full-speech/>)). PM Abiy confirmed their presence and role in his 23 March 2021 address to parliament (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NMjLTkUdFw>).

In general, a critical attitude is needed in appraising all statements, including those of the Ethiopian government. But the government and its local media can be made accountable to their official statements and printed information, and they provide such statements and information all the time. Until these are proven to be false, one can and must use them. Western media and governments are wrong to ignore or belittle them. And secondly, we are not dealing with a systematically duplicitous regime like the TPLF-EPRDF government was before 2018. However, the current statements of TPLF remnants, diaspora support groups and pro-TPLF groups made in digital space are unfortunately not properly scrutinized but used uncritically by most media.

The ultimate aim of the TPLF in initiating the armed conflict was also ignored by foreign commentators: to defeat the federal army in Tigray and use all the captured armaments to march on to Addis Ababa and retake state power – an illegitimate course. The global media instead often put the blame for the unfolding conflict on the Ethiopian federal government, again easily putting the country aside as perennially undemocratic, underdeveloped, with low standards (<https://eastafricanist.com/2020/12/15/716>) and conflict-prone, but that is incorrect. This war was forced upon the federal government, and during the fighting the global media expected, even demanded, that everything that happened should be disclosed, which is impossible. The automatic suspicion that the Ethiopian army would systematically abuse its powers like under the previous regime was wrong. In Ethiopia in the past three years, an unprecedented process of political reform has opened up and the federal army has made great strides towards professionalism and is not a run-of-the-mill undisciplined outfit. Regarding army abuses in this conflict, Ethiopian PM Abiy also said on 21 March 2021: “...accountability and disciplinary gaps will be addressed through the appropriate channels”. (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/21/pm-meets-with-leadership-of-ethiopian-national-defense-forces/> and <https://www.fanabc.com/english/any-soldier-responsible-for-crimes-in-tigray-region-will-be-held-accountable-pm-abiy-ahmed/>). He repeated this in a parliament speech on 23 March this year (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NMjLTkUdFw>), saying also that “..just like we do not accept violations by Ethiopian troops, we do not accept any form of violations by Eritrean troops”. Regarding the global media and advocacy INGOs, accuracy in reporting is vital, also for policy-making – and too little of it is around.

2. The need for informed decisions

Ill-informed decision-making based on hearsay, unproven evidence and hasty judgement further threatens the credibility of Atlantic powers' foreign policy-making. As Robert Prince also recently suggested in a commentary piece

(<https://robertjprince.net/2021/03/18/ethiopia-following-in-the-path-of-yugoslavia-iraq-libya-and-what-washington-hoped-to-do-in-syria-susan-rices-war-washington-weaponizing-human-rights-again-this-time-in-ethiopia-prelude-to-a/>), we have seen it towards Libya, towards Syria, towards Russia's Putin when he annexed the Crimea and meddled in Ukraine (including facilitating and probably supporting the downing of flight MH17): no teeth, no decisiveness, no political will, no longer-term geo-strategic vision. The policy of EU and USA and those other countries trying recently to frame Ethiopia in the UN (Security Council and Human Right Commission) are taking a great risk of further destabilizing Ethiopia, in a similar way as with the above-mentioned countries. PM Abiy Ahmed was undoubtedly right when he noted that many foreigners seem to aim for the 'dismemberment' of Ethiopia (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-H5H5UqFuI>). That Egypt, with its self-centered view of the GERD dam issue, is using threat and intimidation as well, probably, as training and support to certain forces to destabilize Ethiopia is known (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwhdqD9aHYk&t=9s> and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-urges-egypt-to-stop-pressure-over-nile-dam/1873422> and <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1815506/middle-east>) but that foreign 'donor countries' from the West are inclined to support this tendency to always question Ethiopia's leadership and approach in the matter is remarkable. They act too much on selective (dis)information and short-term time horizons, with little interest in or appraisal of the context and the political psychology of Ethiopia, which is an extremely complex country. If due to these unhelpful declarations (see below) reviewing or withholding aid and support already pledged to Ethiopia are pursued, then all - EU, USA and Ethiopia - will lose; this would dismantle their long-term political and developmental relationship with the country. The worst-case scenario, initiated by EU commissioner Urpilainen and by Ireland in the UNSC to impose direct sanctions (<https://www.branapress.com/2021/03/13/ethiopia-summons-its-ambassador-to-ireland/>) was averted, for the time being, as we saw from the 11 March 2021 statement. But that the EU was prepared to go so far does not bode well. Ultimately, such a negative EU-USA course would also mean that Ethiopia will gradually move into the direction of closer links with Russia and China – another Pyrrhic victory for the know-it-all Western powers (<https://www.politico.eu/article/ethiopia-plays-europe-off-china-in-bid-to-boost-investment/>).

What is needed is not sanctions, lecturing beyond the evidence, punishment and aid blackmail, but serious cooperation with the Ethiopian government under PM Abiy Ahmed, faced with enormous challenges, that necessitated him to take sometimes

difficult and unpopular decisions. But his course is to be supported, although of course critically. As a thorough reformist with an already respectable record of legal and political renewal, he is struggling with a dismal legacy left by 27 years of TPLF-dominated Ethiopia, marred by imposed ethnic-nationalist divisions and the fall-out of deeply skewed economic policies that had created a fabulously rich ethno-class on top and marginalized many others. The TPLF-EPRDF regime may indeed have done much developmental work for the country in previous decades, but it also inculcated a negative political psychology in the social fabric of the country. PM Abiy Ahmed's government and civil administration, with a large number of highly qualified and committed professional people, has been trying to reset and do away with the negative consequences, appealing to cooperation, synergy and country-wide economic reform and investments. It is nevertheless a moot question if the Ethiopian people at large, divided as they already are after decades of TPLF policy, can fully live up to this.

The international community keeps repeating *ad nauseam* that 'unrestricted access' to all of Tigray has to be given for their aid and therefore it has long waited with expressing full cooperation with the federal government. Until very recently, almost 70% of all humanitarian aid to Tigray (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/04/fed-govt-spends-1-87bln-bir-to-support-3-8mln-people-in-tigray/>) in the wake of the conflict was provided by the Ethiopian government from its own stocks (And according to UNOCHA, *before* the conflict started, already some 950,000 people in Tigray were in need of urgent humanitarian aid (<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-30-march-2021>) and in total ca. 1,8 mln were in the food safety net programme for years – the fruit of 27 years of TPLF 'development'). Only some 30% was provided by the international donor community, much of which by the World Food Programme. Its director David Beasley on 25 February 2021 had the decency to compliment the Ethiopian government for its efforts (<https://wfpinfo.com/wfp-chief-commends-progress-of-humanitarian-assistance-in-tigray/>). Again, the constant criticism and prevarication by the EU and USA and others is evidence of believing persistent disinformation, bias or perhaps some hypocrisy, which help no one, least of all the Tigray people. Up to mid-March 2021, calls for 'full humanitarian access' still came with a boring if not sickening regularity, apparently used as a political tool, but now may no longer be relevant, because representatives of 35 foreign aid agencies in mid-March were enjoying that access, provided by the government. This international aid access cannot be unregistered and 'unrestricted' because: a) of safety issues, and b) because some of them were suspected of wanting to help ex-TPLF people and officials to get out of the area. In December 2020, some UN vehicles were also accused of crashing through official checkpoints

[\(https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-calls-on-humanitarian-workers-to-follow-security-guidelines/\)](https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-calls-on-humanitarian-workers-to-follow-security-guidelines/). Incidentally, first access was already granted by the Ethiopian government on 2 December 2020 (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1079112>), but then the aid agencies did not find it enough – they wanted full freedom of (unsupervised) activity and were not inclined to respect Ethiopian sovereignty. Also worth knowing, and again refuting the continued alarmist narratives of the EU, UN and USA, is that most hospitals in Tigray are already operating again and health personnel is getting their salaries (although they are severely hampered by lack of facilities and sufficient staff). The Ethiopian authorities, not the aid agencies, took the initiative in this (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/06/govt-allocates-nearly-40bln-birr-to-provide-food-aid-in-tigray/>).

3. Responses of the ‘international community’

Looking at the responses of the EU, the US and the UN to the armed conflict so far, we saw multiple and rash expressions of ‘deep concern’. And as in any war there *is* reason to be concerned. Innocent people were caught in the crossfire of this harsh confrontation between massive armed forces, and civilians were abused and killed. But as noted, the concern of international community seems selective and biased strongly against the federal government. That is not a sound basis for policy response. Below, I present documentation of the reactions and decisions by the ‘international community’ to pinpoint what I mean by ‘rash, uninformed and misled’ reactions.

3.1 The EU

First the EU. Already on 16 December 2020 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-commission-suspends-nearly-90-million-euros-in-aid-to-ethiopia-over-internal-conflict/>) Brussels announced it would postpone some € 90 mln in aid to Ethiopia “over its failure to grant full humanitarian access to Tigray”, but by passing over any issue on who started the war and who brought about the misery. On 16 February 2021 there was a surprising call by the EU Commissioner for international partnerships Ms. Jutta Urpilainen (<https://www.devex.com/news/eu-development-chief-calls-for-united-response-on-ethiopia-99184>) to develop a ‘coordinated response’ to see if aid and loans to Ethiopia should be frozen and blocked by all donors (<https://www.devex.com/news/eu-development-chief-calls-for-united-response-on-ethiopia-99184>) – an unprecedented call, seen by some as akin to aid blackmail.

More recently on 11 March 2021, the EU decided to again reprimand Ethiopia, threatening to block further development aid and punish the country for alleged human rights abuses during the military operations against the TPLF in Tigray, among them leveling the claim that the government forces had specifically targeted civilians in the conflict - although the harshest words hereby were for the presence and alleged deeds of Eritrean army units. The EU resolution intended to force the Ethiopian federal government to respond to additional calls for ‘unrestricted and open access’ for all the promised foreign humanitarian aid. The discussion on this on 11 March 2021 in Brussels led to a statement of concern: “The Council is extremely concerned by the numerous **testimonies** as to possible war crimes and crimes against humanity, extra-judicial killings and other serious **human rights violations and abuses**. The EU calls for these actions to **end immediately** and for **perpetrators to be brought to justice** (their own bold) (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/11/eu-ethiopia-relations-eu-council-conclusions-stress-the-strategic-partnership-and-eu-s-deep-concerns-about-the-situation-in-the-tigray-region/>), with the Ethiopian federal government again singled out. So, as of 11 March 2021, the EU top people were still talking about possible sanctions because of “... Ethiopian authorities and others obstructing humanitarian aid” (<https://euobserver.com/foreign/151189>). This showed that they had a preference for certain news sources and no learning curve on appreciating the situation on the ground. They were not recognizing the – admittedly insufficient - assistance already provided by the federal government and the Ethiopian people. The EU and assorted humanitarian aid agencies apparently first wanted to put Ethiopia in the dock before really scaling up their own aid. On 22 March 2021 the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell followed it up with yet another great statement, saying the EU is “...ready to activate all our foreign policy tools against those responsible for human rights violations,” in connection with the ongoing armed conflict in Tigray regional state, and that “this applies to all parties to the conflict.” He continued with the demand that the EU wants to “... have humanitarian access to the region and we want an independent investigation on human rights abuses and we want Eritrean troops to be withdrawn.” (<https://addisstandard.com/news-eu-ready-to-activate-all-foreign-policy-tools-against-human-rights-violations-in-tigray-to-dispatch-envoy-back-to-ethiopia/>). This is however not for the EU to demand or decide but for the Ethiopian government, in its own pace and time. On 26 March 2021, PM Abiy Ahmed did announce a proposal for Eritrean troop withdrawal (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/26/eritrea-to-withdraw-troops-from-northern-ethiopia/>).

3.2 The USA

Secondly, the USA. On 27 February 2021 the new US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken gave out a statement called ‘Atrocities in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region’ (<https://www.state.gov/atrocities-in-ethiopias-tigray-region/>), the US being “...gravely concerned by reported atrocities and the overall deteriorating situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia”. It was a somewhat fictitious text, putting all blame on the federal Ethiopian forces and on Eritrean army units and Amhara regional forces. Nothing was wrong, apparently, with the former TPLF’s forces and their sympathizers, who had been busy re-sabotaging restored power lines (<https://mereja.com/index/349164>), government offices, ICT infrastructure, trying to disrupt food aid, and killing drivers of aid caravans and Tigray university students (<https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/446121/ethiopia-militant-attack-on-passenger-bus-near-adi-mesino-tigray-region-leaves-at-least-six-people-dead-10-others-injured-feb-18>). No assessment of the sources of this information was evident. Perhaps a bizarre *Washington Post* editorial of 27 January 2021, stating that Ethiopia’s federal army had started an ‘invasion’ of the Tigray regional state had had its effect on him (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/abiy-ahmed-ethiopia-tigray-invasion/2021/01/27/b5ccd58e-5ff9-11eb-9430-e7c77b5b0297_story.html). Within the US government there seems to be no totally clear line yet on Ethiopia. The newly appointed US ambassador to Addis Ababa Ms. Geeta Pasi seems to be more critical towards the TPLF and its record (<https://www.press.et/english/?p=29324#>) while the USA ambassador to the UN Ms. Linda Greenfield-Thomas (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-puts-onus-for-ending-tigray-suffering-on-ethiopia/2165245>) has the same attitude as Secretary Blinken—blaming it all on the Federal government.

A second remark in Secretary Blinken's speech of 27 February 2021, very surprising to come from USA Secretary of State, was the call for the ‘withdrawal of Amhara special forces’. That call was repeated in the speech of USA UN representative Linda Greenfield-Thomas on 4 March (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoPNGFLBNV8&t=1s>), and perhaps taken from the media, like the *New York Times* (9 December 2020 and 26 February 2021). This also follows the utterings of pro-TPLF sources, human rights reports and even recent International Crisis Group memos, where the ‘atrocities of Amhara forces’ are presented as facts (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/167-finding-path-peace-ethiopias-tigray-region>). Next to this, it also seems to be that some pro-TPLF people formerly active in the Clinton and Obama administrations are ‘advising’ the USA

government, like Susan Rice, known for her cozy links with the former TPLF regime and who went wrong with her very first 2021 tweet on Ethiopia (<https://twitter.com/AmbassadorRice/status/1330537213373927425> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/10/opinion/susan-rice-africa.html>), the not yet well-informed security adviser Jake Sullivan, and the ever-meddling former Assistant-Secretary of State for Africa Herman J. Cohen (<https://twitter.com/CohenOnAfrica/status/1372611630064930828>; <https://twitter.com/CohenOnAfrica/status/1343695766938910720>), who for many Ethiopian observers has done enormous damage to Ethiopia over several decades. The role of Amhara forces (from the bordering Amhara Region) and their specific presence is a very complex matter but not entirely strange. The matter has a prehistory that Secretary Blinken and colleagues may know little about. Suffice it to mention here only three points: a) the Amhara forces, who resort under the Amhara Region security forces and report ultimately to the federal security structure, came to assist the federal army when the latter was attacked without warning on 3-4 November 2020 and outnumbered in the early days by the TPLF. The Amhara Region forces assisted in turning the tide and saving lives. One cannot reproach these forces to have assisted, by sacrificing their lives, in subduing a national armed rebellion; b) Gondar and Bahir Dar cities in Amhara Region were attacked with TPLF missiles on 13 and 20 November 2020, well before the fall of Meqele, and c) the Amhara forces are notably active in areas that were controversially annexed by Tigray on order of the then TPLF-dominated Ethiopian government in 1991-1992. They were severed from the Gondar (now Amhara) Region for mainly economic reasons - the agrarian lands used for cash crop production, as political scientist Mehdi Labzaé demonstrated (<https://polaf.hypotheses.org/7196>). These were Wolqait, Kafta-Humera (bordering Sudan), Tsegede and Tsellemt. Historically, these regions (across the Täkkäze river from Tigray) were not a part of Tigray Region. The inhabitants also did not identify as belonging to or being ‘Tigray’, despite a substantial rate of bilingualism in Amharic and Tigrinya (A similar issue came up on the status of the Alamata region, in southern Tigray). The TPLF regime has in the past 27 years actively worked to forcefully change the demography and character of these areas, sometimes with gross abuse (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG4MITjUnv4> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OC1p2FFymNs> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCfvhUgOYTQ>). The status of the four areas will likely be subject to negotiation and constitutional deliberation after the stabilization of Tigray and the upcoming Ethiopian parliamentary elections of June 2021, and the original inhabitants will claim a forceful say. Paradoxically, the presence of the Amhara forces in these parts may have contributed to prevent further massacres like the one on 9 November 2020 in Mai Kadra, which was a dramatic, crucially defining event. It is

somewhat understandable that the Amhara forces will not simply ‘withdraw’ from here. Apart from this, it is debatable if their presence there is a cause of Tigray’s instability or humanitarian problems, as Secretary Blinken seemed to suggest. In addition, as PM Abiy noted in his 23 March 2021 parliamentary speech: “The Ethiopian government is not authorized to speak in which US states the US troops should be deployed. Likewise, the US government can’t comment on the deployment of troops within Ethiopia”.

On 10 March 2021, Secretary Blinken gave ‘testimony’ to the House Foreign Affairs Committee and stressed the need to ‘stop ethnic cleansing’ in the Tigray region, based on information in a USA ‘secret report’. But this so-called secret report on the alleged violence referred to by Secretary Blinken is much less reliable than announced (<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/nyt-offering-a-dangerous-version-of-truth-in-ethiopia/>). It is worrying that a top foreign policy person like Blinken would formulate policy response on the basis of this. However, on 18 March 2021, he announced – finally – that the US would provide Ethiopia with an additional \$52 mln in humanitarian assistance for Tigray, bringing the total pledged USA aid sum to \$ 153 mln. (<https://www.state.gov/u-s-announces-additional-humanitarian-assistance-for-the-tigray-crisis-response/>) Still, the accompanying statement spoiled it, by saying “.... the situation will get worse without a political solution.” This introduces another element. What does that mean? A big step in a political solution has already been reached: the removal of the TPLF regime in Meqele and the gradual normalization of Tigray political space via a transitional/interim government carried by Tigrayan people and a move towards future elections.

In late March 2021, US President Biden’s ‘special envoy’ Sen. Chris Coons met with the Ethiopian leadership and suggested a “...rapid move towards a full political dialogue on Tigray’s future political structure” (<https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-appeals-cease-fire-ethiopia-tigray-rejected>). This idea of moving towards ‘political dialogue’ seems to be a standard phrase in the diplomatic jargon, but in this context it is not clear what it means. One can be sure that the Ethiopian government and the public at large will never agree to a ‘dialogue’ with a rump-TPLF or its remaining leaders after the sabotage and crimes that they were seen to have committed.

3.3 *The UN*

At the UN Security Council the conflict was first raised in a 24 November 2020 meeting. There “...members emphasized the importance of de-escalating the conflict, expressed concern about the impact of the fighting on civilians, and underscored their support for

regional engagement to resolve the conflict”

(<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2021/02/ethiopia-tigray-council-members-to-discuss-the-humanitarian-situation.php>). Nice and fine, but again, not one word about the 3-4 November night attack of the TPLF Tigray government on the federal army units, about their massacre of hundreds of sleeping soldiers and the abuse of many others, about their destruction of the Tigray Region communications infrastructure just before the attack, or about the massive theft of all federal heavy army equipment of the Northern Command – acts of war and betrayal, if there ever were any comparable. The UN’s expedient remarks about humanitarian problems continued in subsequent months, but no recognition that they were largely *caused* by these TPLF deeds, and it did not sound convincing without the context of this conflict being taken into account. Neither any word of compassion by the UN and other global players for the federal soldiers cowardly killed in a non-combat situation and on the massive damage done, nor about the civilians killed (among them a peasant family in Debareq) in the unprovoked missile attacks by the TPLF forces on Gondar and Bahir Dar cities (Amhara Region) on 13 and 20 November 2020 (<https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/401771/reports-of-rocket-attack-in-bahir-dar-amhara-region-november-20>). These cities also suffered millions of dollars of damage.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michele Bachelet soon added her voice to the chorus. Already in November and on 22 December 2020 her office had issued warning statements (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1080622>) and in the second one it said: “We have received allegations concerning violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, including artillery strikes on populated areas, the deliberate targeting of civilians, extrajudicial killings and widespread looting”. Yes, but again the 3-4 November 2020 TPLF attack and subsequent abuse were never mentioned. The statement continued: “While telephone lines are beginning to be restored in some areas, the communications blackout that began on 3 November and restrictions on access raise significant concerns that the human rights and humanitarian situation is even more dire than feared,” thereby neglecting the fact that it was the TPLF that had itself caused the communications blackout by destroying the power lines and Internet connections. She did mention the 9 November 2020 Mai Kadra mass killings (although described in the statement as ‘alleged’) but immediately followed up with the bland remark: “It is essential that there are investigations into allegations of human rights violations there against both Amharans and Tigrayans.” (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1080622>). More on Mai Kadra – an ‘ethnic cleansing’ operation whereby more than 800 people were murdered - below.

On 4 March 2021, Bachelet's office followed with another statement (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26838&LangID=E>), saying: "Deeply distressing reports of sexual and gender-based violence, extrajudicial killings, widespread destruction and looting of public and private property by all parties continue to be shared with us, as well as reports of continued fighting in central Tigray in particular." But not all these reports, mostly implicating not TPLF but federal and Eritrean forces, are substantiated well as to nature, sources and reliability. The Ethiopian government has stated that all these cases must be investigated (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/14/ethiopia-rebuts-u-s-allegations-of-ethnic-cleansing-in-tigray/> and <https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/law-order/1500643-un-rights-chief-agrees-to-ethiopia-request-for-joint-tigray-inquiry>). It is not clear if other perpetrators than armed forces personnel are involved, e.g. released criminals (<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/10-prisons-tigray-destroyed-commission-reveals>). The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission report of 10 February 2021 reported 108 cases of rape in two months; the Tigray Region Women's Affairs bureau mentioned 524 reported cases between November 2020 and February 2021 only from Meqele, Adigrat and surrounding areas (<https://addisstandard.com/news-tigrays-women-affairs-communications-bureaus-confirm-sexual-violence-in-the-region-is-rampant/>). In addition, there were also reports on the abuse and abduction of (Eritrean) refugees in the four camps in northern Tigray. While irregularities certainly occurred here (also *before* the federal army took over the region, with TPLF authorities not treating the refugees properly, and having built two camps too close to the border, according to international legal norms), there was no mass killing or massive forced repatriation; on 30 January 2021, the UNHCR had to refute earlier allegations of refugees being 'forcefully returned' to Eritrea (<https://tesfanews.net/unhcr-refutes-abduction-forced-return-eritrean-refugees-allegation/>).

In a UNDP memo of 16 February 2021 to the UN Secretary-General (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/09/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-united-nations-undp-memo-atrocities-ethnic-cleansing-allegations/>), there was a plea to recognize the prime responsibility for the armed conflict to lie with the TPLF, as the 3-4 November attack would be an "...act of war everywhere in the world, and one that typically triggers military response in defense of any nation". It also noted that the "... the international community (...) failed to address Tigrayan provocations over the past two years, including its opposition to government reforms and refusal to engage in political talks with the government." (ibid.). This was no doubt a more balanced view. However, the views of the UN Secretary General A. Guterres and his 'chief relief coordinator' Mark Lowcock were still in line with the gullible mainstream: claims that there "... is an

orchestrated campaign of ethnic cleansing across parts of Tigray, with large numbers of witnesses reporting that Eritrean soldiers and Amhara militias are responsible.”

(<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/09/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-united-nations-undp-memo-atrocities-ethnic-cleansing-allegations/>).

4. Social media war and cyberspace obfuscation

So much for the narratives of concern and accusation by the Atlantic partners and the UN. All these UN and Atlantic bloc statements tend to put the big blame on the Ethiopian federal government, Eritrean troops and Amhara forces, not on the TPLF. Sadly, the stories are often inaccurate and based on lack of solid information and appraisal, often echoing pro-TPLF voices. They eagerly cite unreliable and lying ‘witnesses’ and show faulty estimates of the full context and facts of the conflict on the ground. The issue of the Eritrean army’s presence, the looting, etc. is a difficult point and must be investigated thoroughly (However, pro-TPLF complaints about Eritreans’ involvement now sound somewhat duplicitous because in May 1991 Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front forces, who afterwards formed the government in independent Eritrea, had a very important part in TPLF’s conquest of Addis Ababa – when they were still allies).

As noted, in the media wars a significant role was played by TPLF activists, journalists and academics (<https://eastaficanist.com/2021/02/16/how-tplf-turned-foreigner-experts-into-an-army-of-propaganda-ninjas/>): they have been busy disseminating, with some success, a narrative on the conflict decentering the TPLF from their responsibility in initiating the fighting and from any abuse, like the massacre in Mai Kadra of 9 November 2020. The pro-TPLF supporters and ‘cyber army’ are imaginative, many of them producing words and ‘facts’ freely, under pseudonyms like ‘Mistir Sew’ (= ‘mystery man’) and others. As we saw, certain non-Ethiopian academics uncritically swallowed any alarmist testimony from TPLF-affiliated ‘locals’

(<https://twitter.com/KjetilTronvoll/status/1339286813907804166> and <https://eritreahub.org/interview-with-a-senior-tigrayan-leader>), although subsequent developments hardly confirmed any of it. On pro-TPLF websites, Tigray Media House, and via ‘DigitalWoyane’, the social media propaganda arm of the TPLF and its sympathizers, instructions circulated on how to dupe foreigners in creating misinformation (<https://twitter.com/SirakBahlbi/status/1371296882648092679>, and https://twitter.com/TPLF_Lies/status/1370571385249038336). Notorious also is one Alula Solomon, of Tigray Media House. His ‘information’ is hardly ever reliable – and has more the character of incitement

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFyMwSg_MM0&t=7s). There is even a bizarre

hashtag #TigrayGenocide’... (<http://awasaguardian.com/index.php/2021/02/15/what-is-tigraygenocide-all-about-fact-check/>). Surprisingly, these cyberspace pro-TPF people have been fairly successful, at least in the short run, in convincing certain naïve academics and Western press persons. The problem is simply that nothing emanating from these sources can be trusted without deep-checking (<https://www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2020/12/over-25000-fake-news-per-day-published-on-twitter-during-Tigray-conflict.html>). There were, for instance, fake reports on the downing on an Ethiopian warplane, of ‘battle victories’ and of massacres that did not happen.

Out of an alleged concern with the people of Tigray, media and policy makers are focusing not on causes but on issues that *result* from those TPLF war acts, thereby exaggerating new stories of abuse, impending famine, and massacres across Tigray, preferably among innocent civilians. This in order to shift the blame from TPLF to the federal government of PM Abiy Ahmed. But as we saw, that government had no choice but to respond on 4 November 2020, and it has been making serious and costly efforts to undo the damage and resurrect Tigray via significant aid flows (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/06/govt-allocates-nearly-40bln-birr-to-provide-food-aid-in-tigray/>), investigative missions and rebuilding infrastructure and community life (See ‘Statement on the Tigray Rule of Law Operations’ at https://www.pmo.gov.et/press_release/). Meanwhile, the vehement social media and Internet site battles and recriminations that take weeks to sort out are continuing.

That Western media and policy makers often digest such ‘information’ as gospel truth and blame the Ethiopian federal government and the Eritreans is worrying, and has overtones of a new sanctimonious round of lecturing an African country in crisis. Sincere concern about human rights and possible war abuses is fine, but the underlying attitude of teaching a developing African country a lesson is misplaced. Also Europe, with its own weak and sub-standard approach to the refugees and asylum seekers coming to its shores (think of those in the Greek island camps) and its unsuccessful approach to post-Qadhafi Libya, on the Ethiopia issue again falls back on haughty behavior, exemplified best in J. Borrell (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/news/eu-ethiopia-diplomatic-feud-intensifies-over-tigray-criticism/>, <https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/21/pm-meets-with-leadership-of-ethiopian-national-defense-forces/> and https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_21_888) and J. Urpilainen (see above). On Ethiopia, they have not made a deep comparative assessment of the facts on the ground and their context, and also routinely belittle or ignore statements and explanations made by the Ethiopian federal government. But this is not a

government like the TPLF-EPRDF government was. The latter was known for durable repression and deceit (from the start in 1991, as Professor Ivo Strecker has shown recently (<https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/02/11/tplf-strategies-of-deceit-a-reminder/>)). The current government is different. One does not have to believe or accept all of its statements, but certainly PM Abiy Ahmed's government is marked by the reform agenda set in 2018-19 and appeals to the public to forge a new political culture, away from authoritarianism and recrimination, the hallmarks of the former TPLF regime. To by definition slight the approach that the Addis Ababa government and the interim government in Tigray are pursuing is a wrong if not neo-colonialist attitude. Remarkably, it is being routinely produced also by the international press. The head of the interim government Dr. Mulu Nega recently noted that, although they had given full access to foreign news agency correspondents to go anywhere in Tigray, the latter don't ask for interviews or information from the Tigray regional administration involved in rehabilitation and aid provision. They prefer to follow only the contact lists they received abroad, likely from pro-TPLF networks and other professional critics of the Ethiopian federal government (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utAj-DsgfjE&t=4s>). They look primarily for 'bad news'. Earlier, Mr. Muluberhan Haile, administrator of Northern Tigray, in some interesting interviews already noted similar things (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdOf20HauI&t=3s>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yseub74G5Xk>). Here the attitude of the foreign press often seems to be hardly different from that of British author Evelyn Waugh in the 1930s in his reports and book on Ethiopia, widely condemned as arrogant and racist (<https://jeffpearce.medium.com/how-western-media-and-others-are-still-failing-ethiopia-b79ceddc9e18>). Western countries, e.g., the USA, also exerted undue pressure on neighbouring African countries to join them in the UNSC and put Ethiopia in the dock. Remarkable is that US President Joe Biden recently made a telephone call to Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta on the Ethiopia conflict but did *not* talk to PM Abiy Ahmed about it. On 21 March, however, the special delegate US Senator Chris Coons, personally sent by President Biden, entered into talks in Addis Ababa with the Ethiopian leadership, first with Minister of Foreign Affairs and vice-PM Demeqe Mekonnen, and later on 26 March 2021 with PM Abiy. In that talk, Sen. Coons brought up the bizarre idea of a unilateral 'cease-fire' – as if two sovereign countries were fighting. Of course idea this was rejected by PM Abiy (<https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-appeals-cease-fire-ethiopias-tigray-rejected>).

What we learned in this crisis is that the global press does not care to deeply check veracity and that Western policy makers love to pose all kinds of demands in a context they do perhaps not really understand or appreciate. As to the press, in fact, many of the

incomplete and incorrect news items now disproved are still found on the websites of the news media, from the BBC (falsely attributing certain tweets to Abiy Ahmed on 25 November 2020) to the *New York Times* to the *Washington Post* to even a ridiculous item in *The Economist* (<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/01/23/ethiopias-government-appears-to-be-wielding-hunger-as-a-weapon>). Some journals followed suit with dubious tales, e.g. *Foreign Policy* with an article on 14 November 2020, entitled ‘Sudan Will Decide the Outcome of the Ethiopian Civil War’ (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/14/sudan-will-decide-outcome-ethiopian-civil-war-abiy-tigray/>).

That the global media and policy makers in the Atlantic countries are susceptible to partial and often misinformation is partly due to the fact that the TPLF-EPRDF was in power for 27 years, gave a semblance of stability and growth to the country, and was diplomatically and economically well-represented in the capitals of the world, including in the USA and the EU. They had established themselves well in the international community institutions. One example is Dr. Tedros Adhanom, now chief of the WHO (<https://ecadforum.com/2017/02/28/is-world-health-organization-who-serious-on-hiring-dr-tedros-adhanom/>): he was a member of the TPLF Executive Committee (the 9-member top group within the Central Committee or Politburo), and was accused (<https://mereja.com/index/351096>) of keeping contact still after his appointment at the WHO on 1 July 2017.

5. Analysing (mis)information

In this section I take a few key examples of how via Internet fakes, unverified entries on Wikipedia, and social media rumor-mongering, dubious news is being distributed on a wide scale. In crises such as this we see how this threatens information transparency, policy thinking and the democratic process. As time goes by, all these incorrect messages will be refuted, but meanwhile they are doing serious damage and make good press reporting difficult. So background information is doubly important. I give some instances below.

1. The 3-4 November 2020 attack: what happened?

The attack on federal army bases by the TPLF late at night on 3 November 2020 came after a telephone conversation that day between Tigray Region President Debretsion and PM Abiy, whereby the Tigray leader said ‘he wanted to negotiate and solve the problems’. It was a false offer and a deflection: that same night he ordered his troops to attack, together with a wholesale sabotage of the Internet and ICT communications structure in Tigray, to incapacitate the federal army response

but also hurting the entire Region. As PM Abiy Ahmed noted in his 23 March 2021 parliamentary speech, the attacks were not only in Dansha and Megele but all in all ca. 200 places where federal troops and officers were located. It was a highly organized operation, admitted by TPLF leaders to be a ‘lighting, pre-emptive strike’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1yThWjhYYo>, at 13.00’). One more characteristic detail of this attack (in Megele), although terrible to recount, is worth noting: several federal soldiers that had survived the nightly slaughter were gathered the next day and then sent away. A few dozen of them were told to pass down a specific road and to ‘keep to the middle’. Then the TPLF unit ordered a few heavy Sino-Truck lorries to drive and run over the soldiers. Seventeen were killed, a few survived by pretending to be dead. Some of them, severely injured and now handicapped, told their story on Ethiopian TV and one of them said ‘Why didn’t I die with my comrades there and then’, and that he never expected such dirty behavior from what they thought were fellow army colleagues. Many other federal soldiers were chased out towards the Eritrean border, where they received food and clothing from Eritrean troops. Female federal soldiers were submitted to gross abuse.

2. Together with the attack, the TPLF regime perpetrated massive destruction of the ICT infrastructure and telecom lines in Tigray. CCTV footage is available on the sabotage in Megele (<https://www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2020/12/cctv-footage-shows-tplf-men-disabling-telecom-network.html>).
3. In addition, grave economic sabotage was carried out, including the destruction of Aksum airport with the ripping up of the runway so that planes could not land there (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55058212> and <https://www.fanabc.com/english/desperate-tplf-destroys-infrastructures-including-axum-airport/>). The TPLF regime had already practiced economic sabotage before: withholding fuel (<https://newbusinessethiopia.com/crime/ethiopian-army-finds-hidden-4-7-million-liters-fuel-in-tigray/>) and food resources from the Tigray population before November 2020, and kept it up until the last moment: it was printing false money even recently (<https://www.fanabc.com/english/tplf-agents-caught-red-handed-printing-fake-ethiopian-eritrean-monies/>; <https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/14/police-make-arrest-in-counterfeit-money-operation-in-mekelle/->). There are also indications that arms smuggling from abroad is ongoing (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSGIFXR7_gM&t=1s).
4. While this does not deny the presence of (too many) Eritrean troops in Tigray, TPLF also mass-produced fake Eritrean and Ethiopian federal army uniforms in

Almeda Textile Factory in Adwa and had some of its own units wear them, which contributed to the mayhem in the Region and probably to the violence perpetrated towards civilians.

5. The TPLF regime, just before its defeat in November 2020, opened all nine regional state prisons, releasing ca.30,000 prisoners of all kinds, thus contributing to local chaos. (<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/10-prisons-tigray-destroyed-commission-reveals>) Also many of the Region's own health facilities were looted, not only Eritrean troops being responsible for this, as alleged by pro-TPLF groups.
6. The massacre in Mai Kadra (in the Kafta-Humera district) on 9 November 2020 just before the federal army arrived, was a defining moment in the conflict. Over 800 ordinary, non-combatant people of mainly Amhara background, but also some Agäw, Oromo and Wolaitta people were killed, even with machetes. (<https://www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2020/11/innocent%20civilians%20killed%20in%20mai%20kadra%20by%20tplf%20forces.html> and <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vS-0N8xCDZDRAM5lzBAELTVjqfKLrzJha8xpKdqh1OE/edit?fbclid=IwAR1vZ2-FWJudLipEl-BIYejLHdeFpmqUHgpetrJ6hIwRkBoA117pCHolj-s>) This tragic event – as case of classic ‘ethnic cleansing’ - was a point of no return. It led to the increased local involvement of Amhara Region militias and probably also to Eritrean interference: some observers say that it is likely that Eritrean military involvement on the Humera front on 11-12 November 2020 deterred TPLF forces from repeating a Mai Kadra-like ‘ethnic cleansing’ massacre in Humera – also a mixed town with many non-Tigrayan inhabitants.
7. One of the most notorious talking points in the global press recently is the Aksum violence, which is said to have happened near the Maryam Tsiyon central church of the town, allegedly in November 2020. There has long been exaggerated and premature reporting on this, with some pro-TPLF reports saying ca. 750 people were killed. Certainly fighting already took place in and near Aksum between army units, e.g. around the army camp outside town, and escalating skirmishes between army soldiers and TPLF elements that had provoked federal army members who lost their comrades in an ambush. A video taken two days after the purported killings shows a large, peaceful assembly of worshippers on the church square: not much evidence of mourning and distress (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utAj-DsgfjE&t=1s>). The Voice of America in its transmission of 12 March 2021 (<https://youtu.be/YlShjPMDOuU>) even screened images and videos of the Amhara victims of the Mai-Kadra massacre (9 November 2020) as if presenting the alleged Aksum violence and suggested that

Amhara militia and Eritrean forces committed it ... Blaming the victims: remarkable misinformation by VOA. It looks like those pro-TPLF digital activists who presented photos of a massacre in Nigeria by 'Boko Haram' (taken on 29 November in Northern Nigeria) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/29/at-least-110-civilians-killed-in-gruesome-nigeria-massacre> and https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/fact-checker/2021-03-14-facebook-image-doesnt-show-massacre-victims-in-ethiopias-tigray/?fbclid=IwAR30-0PR2T4e204FysqQKO30Zx1_8IDrPeegSskEsjW5JDZ6ntIMiuNffls) as being taken in Aksum under the heading 'Aksum massacre' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIV-93bFwFQ&feature=youtu.be>). Also the superficial and hasty reports by Amnesty International and its competitor Human Rights Watch had no conclusive evidence based on real eye witnesses, despite their protestations to the contrary. There was also an embarrassing case of a lying Tigray man posing as an Aksum 'priest' and 'eyewitness' of the 'massacre' but was talking from Boston, Mass. (<https://www.ena.et/en/?p=22049>). Still, a credible but preliminary report based on fieldwork from 27 February 27 to 5 March 2021 by the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/03/23/over-100-civilians-killed-in-aksum-ehrc-reports/>) confirmed that ca. 100 civilians were killed in Aksum on 28 and 29 November, with fingers pointed to Eritrean troops, and according to the EHRC this may constitute 'grave contraventions of applicable international and human rights laws and principles'. The issue has already been a major issue raised in the EU and USA labeling of Ethiopia. In general, the Eritrean presence in Tigray is a moot, controversial point indeed, and no doubt, such troops are/were active in the Region almost from the start, as General Belay Seyoum of Ethiopia's Northern Command reluctantly had said (see above), repeated by the interim mayor of Meqele (<https://allafrica.com/stories/202101050414.html>) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (in its report of 10 February 2021). Still, the full details on Aksum are not yet known. On the basis of the EHRC report, the killings in the city were terrible, although the nature and scale of it as depicted in the earlier Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports stands to be seen, as they relied only on TPLF-linked 'witnesses' who were not even in Aksum on the days of the alleged killings but 350 km. away in Sudan. A previous dissection of the evidence by Jeff Pearce showed no clear evidence of mass killing, only of mass duping of foreign medias and NGOs (<https://jeffpearce.medium.com/ethiopia-lies-damn-lies-axum-and-the-west-242f471c45ae>). As noted above, video recordings uploaded on YouTube originally on 4 December 2020 show that on 29 and 30 November there was a

large religious gathering in the square where much of the purported killings took place, so this is puzzling. If killings occurred (likely as per the EHRC report), they are of course unacceptable and the perpetrators are surely to be prosecuted. Still, the general context of the Eritrean troops' presence in Tigray should not be forgotten: first the relationship between TPLF regime and Eritrea's government was very tense for 20 years, and at the time of the 3-4 November TPLF attack on federal forces, the Eritrean-Ethiopian border was not well-defended because troops had to disperse and move south for battle. It is said that Eritrea aimed to protect her border and to secure the huge trench-system along the border to prevent it from being taken by TPLF forces: that would have given them a major advantage. PM Abiy Ahmed, in his 23 March 2021 parliamentary address acknowledged the role of Eritrean forces. The Eritrean government, he said, had a national security concern to control the border area after the Ethiopian army was forced to abandon positions following the attack on 4 November 2020

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NMjLTkUdFw>). In addition, the TPLF, in an effort to 'internationalize' the war, fired missiles into Eritrea, hitting Asmara on 14 and 28 November 2020. Few countries in such a situation would sit idle and not take retaliatory action. It is therefore strange for the TPLF supporters and foreigners to now complain about the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray when they were 'invited' by the TPLF's own actions.

8. Case misrepresentation. A recent item was the alleged rape of a Tigray girl calling herself 'Muna Lisa' Abraha that was much in the news (repeated by the BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55832711>): she said in an hospital interview to *Al Jazeera* that she was shot at as she tried to escape Eritrean soldiers who tried to rape her. But even her father denied it, and it turned out she was a sniper and member of the TPLF youth militia, wounded in a fight with federal troops and admitted to hospital well before the time she claimed the incident took place. (<https://twitter.com/SirakBahlbi/status/1367326588820463617>)

9. Certain Western media and erring academics (<https://twitter.com/https://twitter.com/martinplaut/status/1375481314896441348>) are citing one of the former propaganda chiefs of the TPLF as a source of news and updates from Tigray, but this man, Getachew Reda (still in hiding), has been known for years as unreliable and irresponsible. In tandem with former regional chief Debretsion Gebre-Mikael, Getachew was the one calling on the Tigrayan common people to attack the federal army with everything they had – "...even with spears and knives" (<https://twitter.com/bbcmonitoring/status/1331526891526901761?lang=en>) and was producing standard fake news on 'battles won' by the TPLF army, e.g. on his

twitter account (https://twitter.com/reda_getachew/status/1366399218064232454).

When media and pro-Tigray persons refer to men of this low caliber (<https://twitter.com/SirakBahlbi/status/1375336212412526594>) to sustain their arguments then their credibility evaporates.

10. An interesting fact is also that the EU, the USA and other international parties rarely talk about other, this time real and documented, ‘ethnic cleansing’ episodes in Ethiopia: the ongoing mass killings of Amharic-speaking and other minority groups in different parts of Ethiopia *before* November 2020. In the 2-3 past years, there has been a series of shocking terrorist attacks by ‘ethnacist’ and perhaps also religious extremist groups on innocent civilians (farmers, traders, civil servants) in Western Ethiopia, notably in Shashemene, Wollega (Oromia) and the Metekkel area (Benishangul-Gumuz State). I mention some recent cases: in September 2020 in Metekkel, with more than a 100 killed (<https://addisstandard.com/analysis-weeks-long-attacks-on-civilians-leave-several-dead-injured-in-metekel-zone-benishangul-gumuz-region/>), in Gulisso district on 1 November 2020 (with ca. 54 people killed), and in Gurafarda, Southwest Ethiopia, with 31 people killed, from 18-21 October 2020 (<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/54-detained-following-death-31-gura-farda>), and on 12 January 2021 over 80 people killed in Daletti village in Benishangul-Gumuz region (<https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/13/more-than-80-killed-in-west-ethiopia-attack/>). The latest were on 5 March in Horo Gudru (<https://addisstandard.com/news-gunmen-who-storm-a-local-church-kill-29-in-horoguduru-western-oromia/>), [in Babo Ganbel district, West Wollega Zone, in late March 2021 with ca. 30 civilians killed](#) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/31/gunmen-kill-30-people-in-western-ethiopia-witnesses-say>), and even in the town of At’aye, in central Amhara Region’s Efrata Gedim district, where since 19 March 2021 dozens of local people were killed in gratuitous violence and with local banks being robbed (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTymWD5MNA&t=1s>). The Ethiopian federal troops do their best to root out such terrorist groups but lack capacity and ability to cover large areas and control such nihilistic killings that could target anyone. The majority local population of Oromo or Gumuz or other ethnic-cultural groups do not necessarily support such actions (as they partly have also been victims and have protested the violence (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4TyoDVuA74&feature=emb_logo), but such violent movements remain active in these regions, like ‘OLF-Shené (the ‘Oromo Liberation Army’), a split-off group from the Oromo Liberation Front. While the latter is now a registered political party in Addis Ababa, the first has

developed into a genuine terrorist group, with a program of wanton killing of ‘non-Oromo’ and other perceived opponents, including local Oromo. There are indications that this and similar groups, killing civilians and operating from forested border areas, have often been armed and urged to carry out such actions by TPLF-related people, as claimed by Region’s communication office head, Getachew Balcha (interview with Deutsche Welle Amharic, 16-12-2020). In his speech to Parliament on 23 March 2021 PM Abiy Ahmed mentioned that ca. 300 OLF-Shené people were recently arrested in Tigray (And see also <https://addisstandard.com/news-ruling-party-members-speak-of-need-to-repeat-tigray-military-operation-in-benishangul-gumuz-as-amhara-region-govt-nama-ramp-up-calls-for-actions/> and <https://www.enca.com/news/african-union-condemns-ethiopia-violence-after-massacre> and <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-in-uproar-after-ethnic-based-mass-killing/2028623> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Tx9f2hysE8&feature=emb_logo). These killings of local villagers and civil administration servants are akin to those of the ‘Boko Haram’ in Northeastern Nigeria, although not in the name of Islamism.

Understanding this trail of violent incidents is necessary for foreign observers/policy makers to grasp the wider context. Although it is likely that many would tend to blame the Ethiopian government again, for so-called not paying ‘attention to the grievances of ethnic rebel movements’, or of ‘failing to offer proper security to local people’, etc.

So indeed, nothing is what it seems in digital fake news space, the source of most of the press items. The EU, USA and UN statements, pronouncements and threats using such ‘information’ are not helpful. And Human Rights Watch had already indicted itself earlier as totally off track with an unacceptable comment (on 24 November 2020) on the Mai Kadra massacre by its Horn of Africa director, Laetitia Bader: “The lack of independent investigations & access to monitors make it difficult to corroborate and identify claims of who may be responsible for such abuses.” (<https://twitter.com/LaetitiaBader/status/1331356503396245507>) This is duplicitous nonsense. And worse, she had no such caveats about the veracity of the ‘Aksum massacre’.

6. Back to policy: the idea of ‘dialogue’ and ‘negotiations’

Both the EU, the USA and UN spokespersons have repeatedly said - in a kind of reflex way - that ‘negotiations’ and ‘dialogue’, etc. should be held among warring parties to ‘solve the problems in Tigray’. A similar attitude is found in the reports of the International Crisis Group, e.g., in its report of 11 February 2021 (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/167-finding-path-peace-ethiopias-tigray-region>). But the question at this point is, dialogue with whom, and why? With the TPLF? With a former self-appointed elite dictatorial party – that ruled the country in a repressive way for 27 years like a well-organized mafia-like outfit, had thousands of people killed, via targeted killings (e.g. of Assefa Maru in 1997, <https://www.ethiopianreview.com/index/58>), by having them disappear in prisons, and by killing hundreds of demonstrators after election protests (like Ms. Shibre Desalegn, <https://www.ethiopianreview.com/index/73>) and mass protests in Oromia (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/15/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests>) and Amhara regions (<https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-riots-in-gonder-claim-casualties/a-19403372>) in 2014-2018)?

Dialogue with a group that perpetrated one of the most atrocious and cruel attacks in modern Ethiopian history, on the federal army’s Northern command in the night of 3-4 November 2020, killing federal soldiers (their erstwhile comrades) in their sleep and abusing or chasing out hundreds of others without clothes? (See below)

With a TPLF-Tigray leadership that refused repeated calls to surrender to the federal government in this war started by them, but instead urging the Tigray common people to ‘fight back with all possible means’, thereby destroying Tigray even further?

Dialogue with a movement that was responsible for a massacre of hundreds of non-Tigrayan people in Mai Kadra on 9 November 2020? USA Secretary of State A. Blinken did not mention this defining dramatic event in his statements. What happened to the perpetrators of that crime (TPLF-affiliated people and youths known as *Samri*)? They mostly fled to the Sudan refugee camps, where they will ask asylum to Europe and the US. And the Europeans and Americans will be gullible enough to grant it to them. In addition, TPLF cadres and leaders have tried to escape from Tigray to Sudan *via* international organizations. It is known that some of the international organizations 4WDs have tried to jump the border and refused check-point controls by the Ethiopian federal troops. It is also rumored that TPLF’s former leader Debretsion Gebre-Mikael had

his wife and son transported out of Tigray via circuitous ways, reputedly (according to some Ethiopian sources) with the help of US Embassy personnel, but he was meanwhile calling on Tigrayans “...to send your sons and daughters to join the struggle.”

(<https://jeffpearce.medium.com/tigray-in-ethiopia-sorry-whose-war-is-it-a70796ac9c87>).

On the issue of ‘negotiations’, the EU and USA foreign policy people also seem blind to the fact that since April 2018, when PM Abiy Ahmed became the new leader of Ethiopia in a regular ruling party vote, he tried in all possible ways to engage in dialogue and negotiation with the TPLF leaders (<https://associatedmedias.com/en/operations-to-restore-law-and-order-in-ethiopias-tigray-region-how-did-we-get-here/>). But they, angry and sulking over losing privilege and power on the federal government machinery and the premiership, refused, rejecting all initiatives (<https://www.ena.et/en/?p=18951>). They surely were apprehensive because not being in power might mean the potential exposure of their many illegal political and economic practices over the past decades. The TPLF leadership and top cadres retreated gradually to Meqele and turned down federal government overtures short of their own return to central power. They even refused to properly receive delegations of Ethiopian elders and religious leaders from all walks of life and from across the country, who came to mediate. These had to return with empty hands. PM Abiy Ahmed revealed in his parliament speech of 23 March 2021 that in 2019-2020 secret (an unnamed) diplomatic community member, and later government negotiating teams were sent by him to Meqele to find agreement, but also these were rejected. This behaviour is not at all in the interests of the Tigray population. While all initiatives and offers were refused, the TPLF held mass army rallies, e.g. in Meqele stadium (see an event in February 2020:

<https://twitter.com/EthioIntercept/status/1367475921188507651>), and organised its own parliamentary elections in the Region in September 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, declared under constitutional mandate (Art. 93, 1-2). They then won a Stalinist 98,5% of the vote and refused to recognize the authority of the federal government. But Tigray is a regional autonomous state subject to Ethiopian federal law. So the ex-TPLF has shown that it cannot negotiate and does not want to. At present, after having provoked war in a most appalling way, the time for negotiation has passed. The choice for armed conflict, with the callous attack on the federal army bases in Dansha, Meqele and others, and for trying to continue it until today, has created its own unstoppable momentum.

Obviously the conflict has been vehement and distressing, and many thousands have died. At the time of writing in March 2021, there are still skirmishes with dispersed TPLF units, e.g., on 18 March in the Raya Dera and Bora area in Southern Tigray, where a

group of TPLF generals and militia forces had ensconced themselves and instead of surrender to requests of federal forces encircling them, they fought. In the ensuing firefight hundreds were killed, including civilians taken as hostage. No doubt new fake stories will be produced on this sad battle, to blame the federal army. This event again shows that calls to TPLF elements to surrender and negotiate are not successful. And even if they would be able or willing to ‘negotiate’ – which they are not - there is little chance that anything positive would come out of this.

We must conclude that, unfortunately, in view of the event of 3-4 November and what followed, the EU, USA and others’ calls for ‘negotiations’ with a manifestly unreliable and a systematically deceitful party are unconvincing, dishonest, and will not work. These calls show a lack of realism or understanding of the complexities of Ethiopia.

Finally a few words about the UN. Ethiopia has always been a loyal and constructive member of the UN, even in the days of the TPLF. It contributed to international peace-keeping missions , e.g., in Darfur and DRC, and was an ally of the USA and the UN in Somalia, containing the Al Shabaab terrorists. To single out and undermine the country on the basis of ill-substantiated accusations in the current Tigray conflict is unjustified and damaging. For the UN to let Ethiopia down and submit it to eventual sanctions or intervention would repeat the historic mistake made by its predecessor the League of Nations in 1936, where Emperor Haile Selassie in vain called upon the international community to stop Fascist Italy under B. Mussolini waging war on Ethiopia. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyX2kXeFUlo>). The League of Nations was on the wrong side of justice, did nothing and thus precipitated the march to World War II. The costs of the current conflict for Ethiopia have been tremendous, and it so far has done this with disappointing international humanitarian resources and threats of aid cuts. In the past months, substantial gifts of money, food and goods have been sent from all over Ethiopia in support to Tigray and the armed forces – by common people and by local governments across the nation (<https://twitter.com/SOEFactCheck/status/1369692421039288320>). The Tigrayan diaspora abroad has so far not been known for giving humanitarian aid to their own region and people: they seemingly prefer to buy air time for their propaganda war (<https://mereja.com/index/348846>).

In sum, the Atlantic Community’s rash and demanding judgements toward Ethiopia are marked by excessive criticism, prevarication, and a biased, accusatory approach foremost towards the federal government. They use ill-digested half-truths and unreliable and incomplete information, often even misinformation. Of course, monitoring of abuse and

calling all parties involved in the conflict (including occasionally Ethiopian media, <https://www.bbc.com/news/56456535>) to account if there are serious indications is necessary. But ‘negotiation’ or a ‘political solution’ with the TPLF (or what remains of it) is no longer an option.

7. *Ways forward*

- EU, USA and the UN do better to re-engage and rebuild a constructive and balanced relationship with the Ethiopian federal government, led by one of the most astute and capable leaders of Africa. Look at the rest of his political and economic programme, and the large number of initiatives and projects he has already started. Do no longer hope for any resurrection of the TPLF, a spent force that, regardless of their past achievements of economic growth and development, is not missed by most Tigrayan people, only by those who have personally and materially benefited.
- Donor countries should focus on more specifically long-term on development and humanitarian goals and less on reprimanding primarily the Ethiopian government without confirmed evidence over its alleged human rights record or alleged excesses committed during the conflict. In this respect, one ‘damage control’ move appeared to be the talks held between Ethiopian finance minister Ahmed Shide and EU Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen in Brussels on 24 March 2021 (<https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-eu-exchange-views-on-development-cooperation> and <https://www.facebook.com/754324577923266/posts/3953550181334007/>).
- Recognizing that TPLF is not the Tigray Region people. TPLF remnants and its social media activists still pursue this narrative and push it on the global media. But such ‘identity politics’ is not the right approach. The federal government does not follow it either. The rehabilitation and normalization of Tigray Region and assisting its population is a collaborative effort in which the TPLF as such has no role. The relationship between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigrayan people should be reset on a basis of respect and cooperation.
- Improve information gathering and assessment. The policy statements and complaints of the Western countries and Western media tend to selectively exaggerate issues they find important and neglect others that are virtually identical in nature but happen to be ‘on the other side’, with (non-Tigray) different victims. Best example: the 9 November Mai Kadra massacre, now pushed to the background in EU-US-UN narrative.

- Check all accusations of ‘atrocities’, mass murder, abuse, etc. produced by pro-TPLF circles and used as a smokescreen, in collaboration with local HR organizations such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Not all will stand up to scrutiny; there are few if any indications on the side of the federal government of ‘targeting civilians’, ‘bombing of residential areas’, ‘massacres’, blocking of humanitarian aid’, or ‘ethnic cleansing’. In this war, started by the TPLF in a gruesome manner (see above), there will certainly be abuses, as in any such armed conflict, and if relevant, not only the former TPLF elite but also the federal authorities or the Eritrean troops are to be held to account. On this issue the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has even approached the UN Human Rights Commission to undertake joint investigations into the situation in Tigray as a whole, and finally on 18 March 2021 the UN body consented to this (Reuters, 18-3-2021; <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26949&LangID=E>). Knowing the rather bad reputation of the UNHRC that is a risky operation, but the federal government is allowing it. Hopefully it will be an investigation that takes its time to get to the bottom of things and will use real witnesses, not those pressured by DigitalWoyane and other pro-TPLF groups.
- Assist Ethiopia in its overall developmental efforts to enhance Horn of Africa *regional* stability. E.g., support a reasonable approach to the Blue Nile Dam (GERD) issue and do not prejudice the side of Egypt on this – which is eternally *refusenik* and will block the dam at whatever cost (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-03-23-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-geopolitical-tension-escalates-the-potential-for-a-war-in-horn-of-africa/>) – including meddling in Ethiopia’s internal affairs.
- Assist inquiries into the trail of repeated pre-war ethnic-styled massacres in Western Ethiopia (Wollega, Metekkel, a.o.) and elsewhere in the country over the past 4-5 years where the hand of the TPLF, providing money and logistical support, has often been often present.
- Contribute to a de-escalation and mediated solution of the suddenly pushed ‘border conflict’ with Sudan, on the basis of the agreement reached in 1972 in the ‘Exchange of Notes’, to come to final negotiations on border demarcation (See <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2016.1143602>). The status quo was disrupted by Sudanese military action in early November 2020 by raiding disputed areas, chasing away Ethiopian farmers, and looting and burning their properties (<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/contextualizing-ethio-sudan-border-squabble>). This conflict, if not handled well, will bash Sudan’s own post-al Bashir reform agenda and produce needless instability.

- Assist Ethiopia in its development of a full ‘Climate-resilient green economy’ (announced under the TPLF regime in 2011) and with its ‘Home-Grown Economic Reform’ programme (since 2019) - both forcefully stimulated by the current Ethiopian government.
- Support the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia in enhancing favourable conditions for the electoral process in Ethiopia for the parliamentary elections announced for 5 June 2021.
- Consider Ethiopia and other African countries as *partners*, not as incorrigible cases of backwardness, institutional failure and conflict, even if there are very challenging problems to deal with.
- Help in expanding the humanitarian aid but also the institutional infrastructure and developmental potential of Tigray region, neglected by the TPLF. How come (see above) that before the November 2020 conflict there were at least 950,000 people in Tigray alone in dire need of food aid and other life support and ca. 1.8 mln in the food security safety net programme? How come there were no opposition parties, no press freedom, no independent NGOs, no open cultural life in Tigray?
- A stable federal Ethiopia is in the interests of Ethiopia and its citizens, the wider Horn of Africa region and Western countries, in particular the EU (as it does not need new waves of refugees and asylum seekers).

In this challenging time, the record of the EU, USA and UN on Ethiopia so far has been disappointing, to say the least. They tend to deliberately exacerbate the situation in Ethiopia. There is an urgent need to remedy this and develop a more informed, balanced and responsible approach.

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